China’s Great Game: Naval Expansion and Territorial Claims under the Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea

asianconsortium-rs.com/chinas-great-game-naval-expansion-and-territorial-claims-under-the-nine-dash-line-in-the-south-china-sea/

December 10, 2024

Written by Muhammad Salman

The Nine-Dash Line is a demarcation line used by China to claim sovereignty over the majority of the South China Sea area. It was first discovered on a map published in 1947 by the Republic of China, which had 11 dashes outlining China’s sovereignty. After the end of the Chinese Civil War, the Communist Party carried on the claim, but it was under nine dashes. The line covers territories claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. China defends its claims by citing historical accounts to assert that it has sovereign rights over the resources of this area, although against international law, specifically breaching the UNCLOS’s Article 2, 56, 77, 87, and 9 by illegal claims over the sea.

The People’s Republic of China’s aggressive maritime strategy has rapidly expanded its naval capabilities, as seen in the recent high spending in defense and upgrading the navy ($231 billion 2024). Tensions with the United States and surrounding Southeast Asian nations are consequently increasing as both nations lay competing claims on parts of the region. In reaction, the United States has stepped up its military deployment, carried out freedom of navigation operations, and formed alliances with regional countries.

The dispute of the South China Sea now sits at the center of the world’s attention as one of the hottest issues because of China’s aggressive expansion of its naval power and its broad aspirations over the territory drawn around the nine-dash line. The significance of this particular area is not restricted only to its trade routes; it is also home to several deposits, especially of oil and gas. The nine-dashed line is the basis for China’s ownership over the majority of the South China Sea.

With China expanding its naval presence, there’s a confrontational race with the United States which in turn presses the U.S. to increase its force to ensure security of navigation. Moreover, China tries to strengthen its control over these waters, impacting its relationships with nearby countries. China’s naval expansion is a central part of its plan to support territorial claims in the South China Sea. With a significant increase in naval spending approximately $26 billion in 2020; China has updated its navy, stationing advanced ships and submarines to show its dominance at sea.

This strategy discourages other countries from making claims and strengthening their control over important shipping lanes and resource-rich areas. The nine-dash line is a key part of China’s claim to nearly the whole South China Sea. This claim is based on

historical stories, but goes against international law. Meanwhile, this article is designed to explain the struggles surrounding the territorial waters of Nine Dots (as show in fig, page 1), the growth of China's navy, and provide insights into the region's geopolitical dynamics of the South China Sea. By means of disputes between shrines, present confrontations, and international law, this analysis aims at providing a better perspective on one of the most controversial areas of today's international relations.

The emergence of tension in the South China Sea has roots in the geopolitical transformations of East Asia in relation to World War II. The sea and its historical claims rest on the so-called "11-dash line" which was drawn by the Nationalists (Kuomintang) in 1947 under Chiang Kai-shek during the Chinese Civil War (1945-49). This map spoke to the Chinese people's assertions of overseas claims, protectionism, and pride after a century, which many Chinese considered humiliated by other nations. In October 1949, through the victory of Mao Zedong led Communists, the newly created People's Republic of China bounded some of the original claims by the Republic of China (nationalist).

The South China Sea was already of American interest in the pre-World War II era because of the colonial status in the Philippines annexed. Following the formal independence of the Philippines from the USA in 1946, the states were excited to enjoy US military protection because of the threat of Soviet encroachment in Asia. This gave rise to the Military Bases Agreement in 1947 and the Mutual Defense Treaty in 1951, which formed America's first security pact in the Pacific region.

This emotional feeling marked the beginning of the U.S. alliance in a system that is in existence, even in Asia. Thus, by the end of the 20th century, the South China Sea had also acquired geopolitical significance, owing to its strategic value in world commerce. Every year approximately $3.37 trillion in trade passes through the South China Sea, which is over 30% of the world's maritime trade. This area is vital for China, as it accounts for 80% of its energy imports and 39.5% of its total trade.

The conflicting claims to resources in the South China Sea have international importance and rivalry among neighboring states. With vast reserves of oil, natural gas, and minerals that are highly sought after, China, for example, has made invalid claims under the nine-dash line that invaded the sovereignty of other countries, such as Vietnam and the Philippines. Overlapping claims have triggered confrontations, including a continuous naval presence.

Moreover, the appointment of Admiral Dong Jun (December 2023) as China's new defense minister is an indication of China's resolve to enhance its naval power, especially in protecting its interests away from its shores. Such aggressive Chinese activities, like engaging in confrontation against a Philippine resupply mission, have increased tensions. China has prioritized its navy over air and land forces, reflecting a strategic pivot towards maritime regions. China's military strategy focuses on controlling the seas.In 2020, China spent approximately $26 billion on its navy, which is a big portion of its total defense budget around $178 billion. This investment has supported China's navy with advanced

ships and submarines, strengthening it at sea. China's push in the South China Sea, which is important for trade and many resources, is similar to past rivalries between powerful countries, like "the Great Game." The U.S. is responding to actions to protect the freedom of navigation, which makes the area tenser. This situation not only increases the risk of military conflicts, but also affects global sea security, showing the importance of controlling the seas in today's world politics.

The U.S. has strategically made the South China Sea a focal point of its foreign policy (Trump administration) i.e. trade war with China and rejecting all its claims over the sea, aiming primarily to contain the threat from China. This type of engagement is in turn reflected in Agreements with the Philippines, which aim to improve military relations and the military capabilities of U.S. allies. Conversely, the United States attempts to improve its grip through military configuration, despite the possible negative consequences of aggravating tension with China. At the same time, ASEAN finds itself in serious dilemmas due to its fractured state, which does not allow it to perform homogeneous and efficient operations with respect to South China Sea conflicts.

The South China Sea is transforming into a challenging region, largely because China's naval buildup continues to have broad ambitions. Chinese actions aid in undermining the United States' presence and UN billings in the East Asian region. With China investing heavily in its naval forces, conflicts become possible, which may spark an arms race in Southeast Asia.

The US prioritized the South China Sea over the Middle East, as its interest has shifted owing to China's rise in the recent decade (The Asian 21st century, p. 49). On the other hand, it has also shifted its focus towards strengthening alliances to maintain sea lanes. Nonetheless, such actions may ignite the tensions in the region. The absence of cooperation within ASEAN serves as a disadvantage in executing bilateral moves with China's aggressiveness towards other states, and with Japan having no navy, other nations prioritize their desires above making comprehensive anti-China moves.

In the future, the South China Sea will determine the relationships between nations in Asia. Instead of misunderstandings that might lead to mistrust, diplomacy and collaboration with a number of countries are essential. Note that the choices they make today determine the power relations in this strategic zone, demonstrating how crucial dialogue and cooperation are to maintain peace and prosperity for all parties involved.

[Muhammad Salman]
The Author, Muhammad Salman is a student of International Relations at National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, specializing in Asian geopolitics with a focus on major power dynamics, sea politics, and non-traditional security issues. His research interests intersect the intricate relationships between the US, China, and Russia in the Asian sphere.